

Review of *Religion at the Corner of Bliss and Nirvana: Politics, Identity and Faith in New Migrant Communities* by Lois Ann Lorentzen, Joaquin Jay Gonzales III, et. al. Duke University Press, Durham, NC: 2009.

Reviewed by Ellen T. McCabe, State University of New York, College at Cortland.

This book takes a close look at the influences and contributions various church and religious organizations make to the acclimation and acculturation of migrant groups, especially in the San Francisco area. Interestingly, this is not a one-way journey; communications and travel by migrants is cross-national. The stories are amazing; the interconnections are endless.

This edited volume grew out of a four-year project conducted by researchers from the Religion and Immigration Project (TRIP) at the University of San Francisco. The geographic location of study began in the greater San Francisco area but spread rapidly to the respective migrants' countries of origin including China, the Philippines, El Salvador and Mexico to name a few. "Although there is a tremendous range of ages in our ethnographic and family interview samples ..., the majority of our adult participants are first-generation immigrants of low socioeconomic status who have relatively little formal education and who have either minimal or no skills in speaking and writing English" (p. xi). Research methods are carefully explained in the introductory remarks.

According to the authors, there is an assumption that immigration is a one-way street however this assumption needs to be changed. Migrants, either legal or illegal, frequently move back and forth between their new country (in this case the United States) and their country of origin. Relationships span international boundaries and problems of citizenship and deportation complicate those relationships.

For instance, the book describes poor youth who are born to Salvadorian parents in the United States who often join gangs to create an identity and a niche for themselves. They feel neither like Americans nor Salvadorians and they use gang membership to bridge that gap. The United States government response to gang members' offenses has been deportation to El Salvador, even when the gang members are U.S. citizens. Having been brought up in the United States, gang members find themselves in a strange country, with few language skills; once again, they resort to gang membership for community.

Since most of these gang members have been identified by tattoos covering much of their bodies, a number of churches have joined forces to provide a tattoo removal service. Former gang members are required to perform ten hours of community service before participating in the removal procedures, which are painful and often take as much as a year to complete. However, the religious group, CASI ("the acronym CASI is a pseudonym for a San Francisco based self help organization." (p. 206)), and the participation in the removal procedures provide a new support structure for these poor migrants and enable them to participate more fully in legal activities.

This is just one instance of church involvement and support of poor migrants. Churches and temples also serve as areas of cultural exchange. The authors describe how The Buddhist Temple and the Presbyterian Mission Program in San Francisco serve as both cultural exchanges and homes of cultural preservation. Veterans of the adjustment to life in the United States who speak their native tongue, serve as interpreters and teachers of both the language and the culture of the United States for those new Chinese

immigrants. Additionally, the Chinese culture is preserved and passed on to younger generations of Chinese-Americans through instruction offered in writing and speaking Chinese.

Each essay in this scholarly work offers a look at another group of migrants with their own peculiar problems and the religious solutions that have provided help and support. The trans-national Mexican trans-gendered sex workers encounter many problems both in Mexico and in the United States where they work to send money home to their families. Their consolation lies in home shrines to “the Holy Death” and in similar shrines that have grown up from churches they frequent. Buen Samaritano is a Pentecostal church that works to instill respect for women in their male communicants, and to decrease violence in Hispanic families.

*Religion at the Corner of Bliss and Nirvana* opens doors to a clearer picture of the migrant experience and what religious organizations are able to do to ease the transitions. The trans-national aspects of these studies provide a new perspective on the assistance that is offered by these organizations both in the United States and in the migrants’ native land. Research questions and the questionnaire used in the study are included in the appendices. Extensive references and an index give, respectively, further information and access to each individual essay. Used as a whole or individually the essays in this book would be an excellent supplements for courses or research in migrant or religious studies, domestic and foreign policy, cultural and language studies. They would be excellent catalysts to class discussions, participatory projects, and further research in the area of study.